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ABSTRACT

In education, action research is research carried out by practitioners with a view to improving their professional practice and understanding it better. This paper concentrates particularly upon classroom action research by inservice teachers, although the approach can also be embodied in preservice training courses and can embrace a very wide range of professional practice outside the classroom. Classroom action research is now seen as a major means of professional development, particularly within innovative inservice courses and programs and, as such, it is attracting growing support and interest. As this approach becomes more widespread, the notion of teacher-as-researcher becomes better developed and more fully understood. This paper outlines the origins of the approach, describes its characteristic features, gives examples, and presents two questions which it raises for Scotland: (1) how will this approach contribute to the development of in-service? (2) how will it contribute to the development of research? (Author/JD)

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The Growth of Classroom Action Research

A paper by M. Cameron-Jones for the day seminar on pedagogy,
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A RESEARCHING PROFESSION ?

The Growth of Classroom Action Research

by

M. Cameron-Jones

SYNOPSIS

In education, action research is research carried out by practitioners with a view to improving their professional practice and understanding it better. (The term 'action research' is not applied nowadays to researching someone else's practice: only one's own.) This paper concentrates particularly upon **classroom** action research (ie research on **their own teaching**) by **in-service** teachers although the approach can also be embodied in pre-service training courses and can embrace a very wide range of professional practice outwith the classroom. Classroom action research is now seen as a major means of professional development, particularly within innovative in-service courses and programmes and, as such, it is attracting growing support and interest. As this approach becomes more widespread and as, through it, the notion of teacher-as-researcher becomes better developed and more fully understood, this paper outlines the origins of the approach, describes its characteristic features, gives some examples of it and puts two of the very difficult questions which it raises for Scotland at present. I hope that the paper may reach teachers who will be embarking upon this kind of research in their classrooms for the first time, may inform those who support and facilitate such work by teachers whether in schools or on in-service courses, and may interest those who simply wish to understand more about classroom action research itself.

THE ORIGINS OF THE CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

The theory and practice of classroom action research came from two historically distinct approaches. It is a marriage between, on the one hand, the formulation and pursuit of action research generally and, on the other hand and more recently, the rise of persuasive definitions of teachers-as-researchers. The definitive statement about the former general idea - the idea of action research as a method for improving the quality of social action - was made almost forty years ago in the seminal paper by Kurt Lewin (1946). In this paper Lewin identified action research as a means for the improvement of social practice by the practitioners directly involved. He drew a distinction between traditional research which aims to produce general laws and published findings, and research which aims to diagnose specific social situations and help the people in them to take action to improve them. It was the latter kind of research which he called "a type of action research", adding that "Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice". Lewin outlined the action research model as a series of spiral steps to be taken by the practitioner, each step being a circle which includes planning action, executing action and "reconnaissance" to evaluate the results of the action taken and to help in planning the improvement of action in the next step of the spiral. This basic formulation has been built upon in various fields and ways ever since. In the early days, its best known follow-up specifically within the field of education was Stephen Corey's book (1953), "Action Research to Improve School Practices", in which Corey stressed the practical futility of a research tradition which sustained the gap between disinterested outsiders who researched classroom problems, and classroom practitioners who tried to understand, and through action to solve, the problems every day. He went on to discuss the benefits which could result from potential creators and potential users of usable research knowledge at least collaborating with each other closely and on occasion becoming one. On the foundation of the latter kind of statement, the teacher-as-researcher movement was begun.

The rest, as they say, is history - and in Britain largely made so by Lawrence Stenhouse. As is well known, Stenhouse's students and colleagues produced outstanding examples of work in the teacher-as-researcher genre, some of which will /

will be mentioned in the next section of this paper. Stenhouse's own formulations appeared in numerous scholarly papers and discussions and were at the time and later disseminated very widely through his writing on education and curriculum development which became not just the standard texts but also the classic statements of our day. He wrote of "the teacher as a researcher in his own teaching situation" (Stenhouse 1975) and he believed in the idea of teachers' research into their own situations and practices as means for professional growth, rather than just as means for accumulating data in the traditional sense or way. His concern was with "the development of a sensitive and self-critical subjective perspective and not with an unattainable objectivity" (Stenhouse 1975). Stenhouse's ideas about the nature and uses of educational theory, for example his stipulation that "it is the business of theory to help the teacher to gain thoughtful control of his practice" (Stenhouse 1983), show how firmly his thinking on the teacher-as-researcher theme was rooted in a vision of the individual teacher's growth and, through that, in curriculum and professional development. The key concept here, it should be noted, is that of **professional development** since that concept focusses our attention on the notion of research as an activity which is educative and developmental for the individual teacher-researcher, as well as (or even rather than) informative for the world at large.

The idea of action research as "not only a research process but also a process of teacher education" (Elliott 1980) is now widely accepted. As one would expect, however, while agreeing that education is not just the subject but is also the objective of such research, writers do differ quite widely in the ways in which they understand this approach as a means of teacher education. For example, when writing about "The Teacher as Researcher" within innovative American programmes, Tikunoff and Mergendoller (1983) strongly emphasise the potential which a teacher's research skills have when used by the teacher as a means for helping him to analyse and adjust his own teaching. They describe interactive R & D programmes in which collaborative teams consisting of a teacher, a researcher and a trainer/developer have parity: together the three formulate classroom problems which have personally been identified in school by in-service teachers, who then themselves learn formal research skills as part of the ensuing co-operative research projects in their schools. In contrast, a British writer (Whitehead 1982) has placed much less emphasis on the establishment of such formal school-based machinery for learning research skills and much more upon the educational potential of individual teachers' motivations for engaging in the improvement of their professional practice. Whitehead saw these motivations to action as stemming, for all thoughtful and self-critical educators, from their responses to continual discrepancies between their espoused principles and their habitual practices. Other writers (eg Evans in Amabile and Stubbs 1982, Nixon 1981, Payne and Cuff 1982), acknowledging that all teacher research is a demanding pursuit whether done individually or collectively, set out more directly to give advice and examples for newcomers to learn from. The most important difference among these and other various writers in the field relates to the degree to which they emphasise the process of reflection. In the "strong" definitions of classroom action research the teacher's reflection on practice and on the action he takes to improve his practice is central, since it is only through such reflection that the deep structures of teachers' practices are loosened and transformed. (By such "strong" definitions this transformation is of course the main point of the activity.) The nature of this reflection is important to note, since, again by the "strong" definitions of classroom action research, it is not enough that teachers, in however a careful and principled way, are thinking about their teaching. To count as classroom action researchers in the strong sense, they must be thinking about it **within an explicit framework of which they are aware.**

THE ACTION RESEARCH MODEL

If one is interested in classroom action research as a form of in-service activity, the importance of this last requirement cannot be over-emphasised since it is precisely his awareness of the underlying model on which he is operating which both defines classroom action research as **professional** development (ie validates it as a certain desirable kind of in-service activity) and defines **as a researcher** the teacher who is doing such research. On the first point, it is a standard mark of professional education that the underlying model of the practice being learned is made explicit to the learner, in the expectation that he will consciously **use this model as a tool in his own self-development**. (Thus, to learn a practice without knowledge of its underlying model or principles or rationale in teacher training, or medical training or whatever, would be regarded as, strictly, sub-professional.) There are numerous examples of this explication of model in the professional literature. For example, in the literature on the interactive skills of teaching (Argyle 1969, Strasser 1972, Brown 1975, Perrott 1982) variations of the feedback loop are presented as heuristic descriptions of socially skilled professional activity in order that pre-service and in-service teachers may use their understanding of the feedback loop to increase their own skills. On the second point, it is similarly a standard mark of induction into action research that the underlying action research model is itself made clear enough and explicit enough for the teacher himself to use it in a conscious way. The two leading contemporary teachers' handbook/manuals on action research (Elliott 1981, Kemmis 1982) for example both, after a page or so of introduction, explain the action research model itself in terms which immediately facilitate a teacher's mastery of it. (It is interesting to note, incidentally, that the model and descriptions given lean heavily still on Lewin's early work.) In both guides, the other explanatory material which is included (eg descriptions of the kinds of research methods which are feasible for practising teachers to use) is subordinate to the detailed descriptions of the model itself and used as aids to the teacher's interpretation of the model rather than as particularly important in themselves. In this, the two guides differ substantially from much of the traditional introductory literature written for new researchers, which often emphasises methodologies rather than underlying models or even simply deals with research as though it were mainly to be understood in terms of various "findings" about some particular "topic".

In brief, whether one is understanding classroom action research as a particular kind of **research**, or as a particular kind of **professional development**, a distinguishing feature of it is the teacher's rational agency - his grasp of the theory which lies beneath his action research practice.

SOME EXAMPLES

Examples of work done by and with teachers engaging in this demanding process make impressive reading. The most famous of those which led the field in Britain was of course the Ford Teaching Project (Adelman and Elliott 1973, Elliott 1977a) which supported teachers in their adoption of an action research stance on their implementation of Inquiry/Discovery approaches. Looking back to the early seventies, it is probably impossible now to appreciate just how rapidly and astonishingly Ford and similar projects recast the prevailing definitions of educational research. At a time when "collaboration" in many projects meant little more than teachers being allowed to help the researcher to collect some of the data, the Ford project was already insisting on the rational necessity of making the underlying research model itself, and its assumptions, clear and explicit to the teachers who were acting within it, thereby facilitating their critical reflection upon the project not merely (which was then and is still now quite usual) at the point of the publication of a final report but throughout the period of **their own enactment** of the study. Such approaches have gained momentum in Britain ever since. The Open University's "Curriculum /

"Curriculum in Action" course for example (Open University 1981) facilitates such an approach. The Classroom Action Research Network (eg CARN 1982) continuously supports and reports the work of those teachers and others who are exemplifying the approach. The Schools Council included it in programmes of work (eg Schools Council 1981) and the Scottish Education Department has funded projects which explore and develop this approach. (These projects include our own Focus on Teaching Project and, established before us and further along the road, the St. Margaret's Project in Stirling, among others.) What this means of course is that increasing numbers of teachers in Scotland and elsewhere are engaged in applying this model to the understanding and improvement of their own practice in school. The total sequence of activity which a teacher undertakes may be prolonged (eg one whole school year or longer) or very short indeed (eg one week); its scope may be very wide (eg the improvement of classroom discussions) or quite limited (eg a more conscious distribution of teacher attention across pupils who are working with resources). Whatever the size of the enterprise, however, the activities in each step of the action spiral are the same. Each step can be summarised very briefly as consisting in **reconnaissance** by the teacher to create an overview of his practice on the basis of a general idea of where improvement might be made: **planning** by the teacher to hypothesise exactly how appropriate action to achieve the change which is sought might be taken, and to prepare in detail for taking that action: the teacher **taking the action itself** and **monitoring** its nature and effects: the teacher **reflecting upon** and evaluating these in readiness for reconnaissance of the changed situation in the next step of the action spiral. Clearly, such a series of steps can be underpinned by comparatively straightforward or comparatively elaborate conceptualisations and research methods, depending upon the practitioner's own disposition and resources. The sort of research methods commonly used by teachers to reconnoitre their teaching and to self-monitor classroom action include self-observation in the classroom (often aided by a tape-recorder, less often by photographs etc) and analysis of classroom events, on-the-spot quickly written notes and records, reflective diaries and summaries, group discussions with colleagues who are similarly minded, peer observation (a chosen colleague, sometimes called in the literature "a critical friend", appraises the reconnaissance and planning, observes the practice being studied and changed and takes part in some of the reflection) and so on. As one would expect, experience, enrolment on award-bearing courses, encounters with relevant Open University TV programmes, encouragement by senior staff of the school and personal ideas about what constitutes "good value for time" all seem to affect the depth of conceptualisation and analysis and the complexity of the investigative methods used by the teachers who do this kind of work. Whether it is done simply or elaborately, however, and by whatever means it is facilitated, the increasing prevalence of this kind of activity points to the acquisition by the classroom action research approach of an increasingly strong "floor" in Scottish schools.

TWO QUESTIONS FOR SCOTLAND

Two questions seem to be raised by this (I would argue) highly desirable state of affairs. Firstly, how will this approach contribute to the development of in-service? Secondly, how will it contribute to the development of research?

- (i) The case for regarding classroom action research as a valuable form of in-service activity has been partially stated earlier in this paper. Certainly, in its being positively developmental rather than based on teachers' supposed deficiencies, in its being teacher-generated rather than imposed, in its being underpinned by a consciously employed theory rather than concerned with superficial technical improvements in teacher performance, in its being applicable to any aspect of pedagogy, and in its being centrally to do with the teacher as the agent of the improvement of his own practice, classroom action research meets the highest criteria of worth in in-service activity (eg Edelfelt 1977, Elliott 1977b). And yet it is very different indeed from some /

some other kinds of in-service. There is the greatest possible contrast, for example, between a teacher updating himself on the agreed **content** of new curricula in order to teach it better to his pupils; and a teacher mastering and using the action research model with all that it implies individually for him in terms of a way of thinking about improving teaching and learning and a systematic process of self-analysis, change, reflection and evaluation. Eraut (1982) has already pointed out that this kind of activity is extremely challenging for the individual teacher engaged in it and that with this, as with any kind of in-service work which is concerned with a teacher's style of teaching rather than with curriculum content, there is a need for very skilful and sensitive support indeed. Elliott (1982) also has recently pointed out that the demanding activities undertaken by a teacher who adopts the classroom action research approach do not just happen - "They require certain enabling conditions which it is the task of facilitators to establish".

For the present, of course, such facilitators are most likely to be those people who staff innovative in-service courses which are based on the teacher-as-researcher model, and we shall need to recognise that many teachers will survive as classroom action researchers only for the period of such award-bearing courses. Or, which is common in Australia (Eltis 1980), Britain (Ashton et al 1983, Cameron-Jones 1982) and the States (Lanier 1983), in-service teachers will go on developing some of the necessary skills of observation, analysis and deliberative discussion about their classroom practice through contributing these, in school, to structured programmes for the training of a student teacher. Such kinds of induction into the approach will of course in future become increasingly common, and therefore easier for in-service course staff to facilitate in schools, as teacher training in Scotland becomes better and more explicitly theorised and organised, for example with the move to externally validated degree programmes for primary teacher training. For the present, however, with the current emphasis on school-based, in-service education the role of the schools' own senior staff as facilitators in full of this challenging approach to teacher development requires very careful consideration. Facilitating teachers' classroom action research calls for certain particular kinds of understandings, knowledge and skills and it would be unrealistic to take it for granted that these always feature in the existing professional and managerial repertoire of senior staff in schools. Elliott (1982) has pointed out how very different this kind of facilitation is from the facilitation of traditional staff development. Indeed, he claims that what is needed now is action research into how effective facilitators actually do establish action research as part of the developmental ethos of their own school. Clearly this whole area raises important issues, whether one's focus is on facilitating classroom action research as a means for an individual teacher's professional development or whether one adopts the view that this approach should not only or primarily be seen as an individual teacher's gain but should contribute additionally, or even mainly, to whole-school improvement.

- (ii) The second question - that of the contribution of classroom action research to the development of research in general - raises rather different issues. It was pointed out earlier in this paper that classroom action research stands on different grounds from some traditional approaches to research, specifically in so far as the latter can sometimes mean that researchers who are outsiders to the relevant situation provide findings which are only some time afterwards, if ever, used by practitioners who are inside the relevant situation and who are therefore in a position directly to improve it. In the past, the two groups met symbolically through the literature or personally if, for example, teachers did research degrees. (The Scottish M.Ed. is a good example of this.) Such a degree in the past would add to a body of knowledge legitimated by academic researchers /

researchers, and would do this through the teacher's use (albeit on a small scale) of investigative procedures which had been similarly legitimated. With the award of the degree, the personal involvement of many teachers in such research activity very often came to an end. The growth of classroom action research, however, has made some very important changes in this pattern. Because the subject and even the objective of this research is the improvement of the individual teacher's classroom practice, there are vast changes in the nature of the knowledge sought and therefore in the methods by which it can be discovered; the location of the research shifts (for example, most dramatically from library to classroom); the supervisor's role changes; the criteria for judging the worth of the research change and need rethinking; the forms of reporting change; and the audiences for the report change as well. In brief, the whole issue of the legitimation of knowledge and of the status of practitioner knowledge comes to be reconsidered. Events after graduation too are beginning to change quite noticeably. For example, some universities and colleges continue to support the teacher-researchers on their return to school by setting up networks of contacts to sustain their action approach on a permanent professional basis, and by providing opportunities for teachers to report and share their continuing research activity and experience. (Two examples of the last in Britain in 1983 were the Classroom Action Research Network Conference in Cambridge University in February and the Action Research and Improvement of Educational Quality Conference in Bath University in October. At both of these conferences teacher-researchers reported their work to other researchers from schools and elsewhere.) But this continuing contact between the teacher-researchers and other kinds of researchers does not always happen. At the British Educational Research Conference of 1983, for example, there was a symposium titled "The Academy in the Classroom" which was arranged to discuss, among other things, the ways in which "the academy" (that is, staff in research institutes, universities and colleges, for example) may relate fruitfully to the practitioners engaged in classroom action research. In the subsequent informal discussion mention was made of some overseas school-based research being so vigorously teacher-initiated and teacher-controlled that school staff viewed offers of participation, consultancy or support from researchers who were not themselves also based in schools, as fruitless. (One must realise, of course, that if the roles were reversed, and if it were the teachers who were making such offers to researchers in "The Academy", their approaches might well, in the past, have been similarly defined here too.) Such isolated examples do not predict a trend but they do make us realise that we need to think carefully in Scotland not only about how the classroom action research approach may be cultivated through in-service courses, or may be facilitated in schools as an enlightened form of **staff development**. Thought must also be given to further and different questions about the kinds of relationships which there ought to be between this and other kinds of **research** activity if each is to enrich, test and develop the other in ways that are educationally desirable.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, classroom action research has potential in Scotland to make an important contribution to the professional development of in-service teachers and to the theory and practice of research of a genuinely educational kind. (By the last, I mean research for education and not just about it.) This contribution will not be secured in full, however, unless we think fruitfully now about how to facilitate such activity as part of the ethos of the school and also about what kinds of mutually developmental relationships we should seek between teachers engaged in classroom action research and the rest of the educational research community.

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